

## SUSANNA WESLEY'S SPIRITUALITY: THE FREEDOM OF A CHRISTIAN WOMAN

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An early entry in her devotional journal not only illustrates the tangled situation in which Susanna Wesley found herself, but it also represents the dilemma that countless other women have faced: finding one's own spiritual center in the midst of the world's expectations.

Were I permitted to choose a state of Life, or positively to ask of God anything in this world, I would humbly choose and beg that I might be placed in such a Station, wherein I might have daily bread with moderate care without so much hurry and distraction; and that I might have more leisure to retire from the world, without injuring my [husband] or Children. Nor should any consideration of Interest, of Riches, Honour [and] pleasure prevail upon me to encumber myself with such a multiplicity of business as I now submit to only in obedience to the Order of Divine providence.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Susanna Wesley, Devotional Journal, 1709ff. Headingley MSS, Wesley College, Westburyon-Trym, Bristol, A, 17–18. Hereafter cited as “Journal.” It makes up the bulk of three duodecimo MS volumes, designated Headingley as MSS A, B, and C by her most recent biographer, John Newton.

MS A contains 192 pages opening from the “front” and 36 pages counting from the “back,” i.e., when the notebook was turned over and reversed. Precise dating is difficult but the year 1709 is inscribed in Mrs. Wesley's hand on one of the “title pages,” and one meditation is marked November 27, 1727. Of eleven other dated entries, most are from the decade 1710–1720 with the bulk in 1710 and 1711. MS B contains, along with some material of the Rev. Samuel Wesley, Sr., 19 additional pages of her devotional journal, none of which is dated. It is probably from the same period as MS A.

The primary contents of MS C are the drafts (or copies) of three long letters containing theological counsel for her eldest son Samuel, Jr., and her eldest daughter Suky (Susanna). Two are dated (1709 and 1709/10). These make up 98 pages, numbered by a later hand. If the notebook is reversed, however, we find 30 more pages of journal, again undated. Confusingly, the pages continue to be numbered from the “front” of the MS, meaning that citation must begin with p. 128 (first page of the devotional journal) to p. 98 (last page of the journal). There seem to be at least ten pages torn out of the notebook, prior to the journal fragments beginning on p. 128.

Excerpts of her meditations have been published, but never in a critical edition. Some appear in Adam Clarke's *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* . . . , 2nd ed. (New York: Lane and Scott, 1851), of which many editions were published during the nineteenth century, and its most recent facsimile edition is also currently out of print. Others excerpts of her meditations were published in the columns of *The Wesley Banner*, a shortlived English periodical, beginning in June, 1852. More recently, some of her entries have been selected and altered from meditations into prayers for modern devotional use by W. L. Doughty as *The Prayers of Susanna Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1956), now out of print. Another modern devotional book borrows several excerpts from Doughty's edition: Donald Kline, *Susanna Wesley: God's Catalyst for Revival* (Lima, OH: CSS, 1980). I am currently transcribing xeroxes of her entire MS works for a projected critical edition of her collected “letters and papers.”

This was the fond wish of a well-educated, strong-willed and able woman in her early forties. Susanna Wesley, however, was exceptional for her time: she had followed her clergy husband from her native London to his remote Lincolnshire parish, buried several times more children than most people have today, and was now in the process of rearing the nine still living—with one having already gone off to boarding school. The Rev. Samuel Wesley's bungling of worldly affairs added another burden to those she already bore, that of managing the household under tight financial constraints. Compounding this, the same failings that had briefly landed him in debtor's prison a decade earlier were responsible for the family's most recent disaster, namely, a fire—probably set by disgruntled parishioners—which totally destroyed the rectory and its contents, though mercifully sparing its inhabitants.

But Susanna Wesley had been born Susanna Annesley, daughter of a well-known Puritan divine, and had brought her early devotional training over with her when she converted from non-conformity to the Established Church. Thus, even in the midst of the conflicting claims of wife, mother, and *de facto* head of the household, she continued to pursue a contemplative vocation, the contours of which are visible to us in her devotional journal.<sup>2</sup>

To the extent that this tension is not unique, and simultaneously because she was such a remarkable and influential woman, Susanna Wesley's "inner history" may usefully serve as a case study in the history of women and religion, which is typically a neglected corner of research. As a recent commentator on women's spirituality has observed, we need to investigate "the extent to which women's religious experience indicates that a struggle for selfaffirmation, self-definition, and autonomous self-donation are intrinsic to their conversion and progress in holiness."<sup>3</sup> While this approach could easily be applied to Susanna Wesley, it is probably best not to insist on any hard and fast definition of feminine (let alone feminist) spirituality.<sup>4</sup> In that spirit we shall seek to let Susanna Wesley speak for herself—as she was wont to do in her own lifetime—and let her story enrich and complicate our knowledge of women's spirituality.

Specifically, this paper will argue that Susanna Wesley, as seen from the evidence of her devotional journal, represents a kind of "missing link" in the history of women and western religion. She may be seen, on the one hand, as the somewhat tamed successor of Puritan prophetesses<sup>5</sup> and, on the other,

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<sup>2</sup> An excellent and brief treatment of Susanna Wesley's life is Frank Baker, "Susanna Wesley: Puritan, Parent, Pastor, Protagonist, Pattern," in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*, vol. 2, eds. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Louise Queen, and Hilah Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 112–131.

<sup>3</sup> Joann Conn, "Women's Spirituality: Restriction & Reconstruction," *Cross Currents* 30 (1980): 302.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Giles, "The Feminist Mystic" in *The Feminist Mystic and Other Essays on Women and Spirituality*, ed. Mary Giles (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Thomas, "Women and the Civil War Sects," *Past and Present* 13 (1958): 42–62. For a general assessment of women in this era, see Roger Thompson, *Women in Stuart England and America: A Comparative Study* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

as the hopeful predecessor of women freed by the eighteenth-century revival (and, paradoxically, by the ascendancy of rationalism in the same century) for non-traditional roles.<sup>6</sup>

We will show that, even though the times were not right for the full development of a woman's talents in non-traditional roles, Susanna Wesley employed in her devotional life three very important "solvents" which could be used to work against the patriarchal biases then prevailing in English religion: she was a woman of conscience; a theological rationalist of sorts; and, if not an "enthusiast" in the eighteenth-century sense, she was at least a person who valued religious experience. While these qualities are not easily separated, either in Susanna Wesley's devotional life or in the larger religious scene of early eighteenth-century England, they may be isolated as clues to one woman's strength, as well as to the progress of women (before and since) in the three major traditions that converge in her: Puritanism, Anglicanism, and Methodism.

## I

The Reformation saw the rise of conscience as arbiter of an individual's actions. Given the priesthood of *all* believers, this new locus of authority could not long be denied women, and eventually the female exercise of this faculty resulted in the erosion of biblically-based, long entrenched instances of patriarchy. Early on conscience might be employed in unexceptionable situations, as when the Independent Katherine Chidley questioned the authority of an unbelieving husband over a believing wife: "it is true he hath authority over her in bodily and civil respects, but not to be a lord over her conscience."<sup>7</sup> But later in the growth of this process, we may observe instances of its use to a woman's advantage even over the assumed authority of a believing husband.

Susanna Wesley's background was Puritan, her father having been an eminent preacher on the subject of conscience.<sup>8</sup> Her own story provides striking examples of the liberating power of conscience. One such is the well-known political/religious quarrel that temporarily threatened the Wesleys' marriage. Susanna had nonjuring, Jacobite leanings and conscientiously refused to add her "Amen" in family prayers when her husband, more well-disposed toward the House of Orange, lifted up the name of King William for divine protection and blessing. Her position was supported by George Hicks, nonjuring Suffragan Bishop of Thetford, in whom she had confided. "Wherefore good Madam," he wrote, "stick to God and your conscience which are your best

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<sup>6</sup> Earl Brown, "Women of the Word: Selected Leadership Roles of Women in Mr. Wesley's Methodism," in *Women in New Worlds . . .*, vol. 1, eds. Hilah Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 69–87; Leslie F. Church, *More about the Early Methodist People* (London: Epworth, 1949), 136–176.

<sup>7</sup> Chidley, quoted in Thomas, 52.

<sup>8</sup> John Newton, *Susanna Wesley and the Puritan Tradition in Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1968), 32–33, 36, 40, 135.

friends, whatever you may suffer for adhering to them.”<sup>9</sup>

Just as dramatic was the occasion of her resistance to her husband's wishes in the matter of holding open prayer services in the rectory kitchen during his absence on church business in London. In response to his disapproving letter home, she justified her irregular behavior in a letter of her own, closing with a sentence that seems to acquiesce, yet powerfully stands its ground:

If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment, for neglecting this opportunity of doing good, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Conscience (and the conscientious performance of religious duty) may result in dramatic non-traditional action on the part of women like Susanna Wesley, but not before it has been tended and nurtured in the interior life. Evidence of such a dynamic abounds in Susanna Wesley's devotional journal.

She is frequently preoccupied with “separating from the world” in order to hear what God has to say to her. “That still small Voice,” she comments, “is not heard amidst the Thunder and noise of tumultuous passions.” As a way of ensuring the attention thus required, she instructs herself to

Keep the mind in a temper for recollection, and often in the day call it in from outward objects, lest it wander into forbidden paths. Make an Examin[ation] of your Cons[ci]ence] at least 3 times a day, and omit no opportunity of retirement from the world.<sup>11</sup>

Here is the very pattern and structure of her devotional life, a thrice daily period of meditation and reflection, traceable to similar devotional practices of her father, among other Puritans.<sup>12</sup> The motivation is the regular confrontation with her conscience; the result is a more disciplined spirituality for an otherwise overly busy woman and, happily for us, the creation of a written record of her inner journey.

She was similarly conscientious in the setting up of rules and the taking of vows, the keeping of which could be monitored in her periods of reflection. On one occasion her exasperation at not practicing the rules she had laid down for herself caused her to exclaim, “be more careful for the future not to be guilty in this matter lest by sinning against the Checks of Conscience you provoke the holy Spirit to forsake you.”<sup>13</sup> Though in this instance the infraction came under the heading of “trifling temper in matters

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Walmsley, “John Wesley's Parents: Quarrel and Reconciliation,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 29 (1953): 55. Samuel Wesley's famous response, as reported by son John, was, “If that be the case you and I must part: for if we have two kings, we must have two beds” (Walmsley, 50).

<sup>10</sup> George Stevenson, *Memorials of the Wesley Family* (London and New York: Partridge, and Nelson and Phillips, 1876), 197.

<sup>11</sup> Susanna Wesley, *Journal*, A, 30–31.

<sup>12</sup> Newton, 136.

<sup>13</sup> Susanna Wesley, *Journal*, A, 42.

of Eternal moment,” a general accusation that haunted her again and again, there are also journal entries that deal with particular issues.

One concerns the vow she took *circa* 1705 never to “drink above two Glasses of any strong Liquor at one time.” Writing later, she implies an infraction not so much of the letter as of the spirit, and wonders if perhaps she should even permit herself the two glass minimum.<sup>14</sup> Still later, however, there appears a positive evaluation of her progress in this regard: she has never broken the vow (even though “your Husband absolved you from [it] as soon as he heard of it”!) and has gone so far as to let her resolution be known to her acquaintances to help “prevent temptation.”<sup>15</sup>

The perennial financial embarrassment of the rectory pushed her to make another vow, this one a paraphrase of one made by the patriarch(!) Jacob in Genesis 28:20–22. As she recalled it in October of 1715:

if God would in very deed give you Food to Eat, and Raiment to put on without exposing you to the Temptation of Anxious Care, or reducing you to the necessity of Borrowing for the necessaries of Life, that then the Lord should be your God.<sup>16</sup>

This was one way she could objectify and conscientiously deal with the anxieties that circumstances were putting on her. The vow gave her a clearcut devotional responsibility in exchange for the vague and uncontrollable fears that had been surrounding her. Her own examination indicates that she lived up to her side of the bargain, though not without feelings of perplexity and sadness from time to time.

Interestingly enough, similar difficulties and a keen sense of her shortcomings pressed her to make a similar vow some twelve years later. In this instance she promised a “universal Reformation” in return for divine deliverance from temporal problems. Consequently, she proposed that

If it will please God indeed to bless me, and deliver me from these D[e]bts . . . , if He will vouchsafe to give me Food to eat and Raiment to put on without debt, without this extreme Distress—then will I offer up myself absolutely, entirely, to Jesus Christ . . . to be instructed by His Spirit, Strengthened and directed by Him, to amend in each particular Failing . . .<sup>17</sup>

In addition to giving us glimpses of her conscience at work, the journal also provides us with an extended theoretical discussion of the subject. In a late (1727?) meditation she is responding positively to William Beveridge’s sermon, “A Conscience Void of Offence.” Beveridge (1637–1708), Bishop of St. Asaph at the end of his life, was a High Churchman with both Calvinist and nonjuring sympathies. Paraphrasing him approvingly, she maintains that all people have a sense of right and wrong, which tells them (if they only listen) what they should or should not do, and, after the fact, either sets the individual’s mind at rest or profoundly disturbs it. But conscience

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 (reverse pagination).

is no small, individual matter: it has divine origin and therefore carries considerable authority, the kind of authority Susanna Wesley would easily use in contravening the traditional authority of husband or church. Referring to Romans 2:14–15, she claims, “This general sense of Good and Evil is implanted by God in the nature of all men.” The point is driven home etymologically:

we may observe the reason why it is called Conscience, and not simply Science—because it is the same Science or sense of things in a lower degree with which God himself hath in an higher; and therefore it doth not simply bear Witness, but as the Original Word signifies, it [?] bears Witness with another, even with God, whether the thing be good or evil.<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, the cultivation of conscience in one's periods of meditation and self-examination might lead to an overly scrupulous ultimately self-defeating approach to life, a negative possibility that Susanna Wesley deals with on a couple of occasions.<sup>19</sup>

In the main, however, her conscience, so carefully developed in times of reflection, became a great source and motivation of non-traditional action. Thus, her defense of the stand she took against her husband's prayer for the king may illustrate a key positive feature of her spirituality:

I value neither reputation, friends, or anything in comparison of the single satisfaction, of preserving a conscience void of offence towards God and man; and how I can do that if I mock almighty God, by begging pardon for what I think no sin, is past my discerning.<sup>20</sup>

## II

In his *Essay upon Projects*, Daniel Defoe, a member of Samuel Annesley's London congregation, argued for the education of women. He wrote, “I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, considering us a civilized and a Christian Country, that we deny advantages of learning to women.”<sup>21</sup> In that spirit young Susanna Annesley had been given every advantage—every advantage, that is, short of the formal classical training that a young gentleman might have expected. Though educated at home, she had access to a large library of English divinity (Anglican and Catholic as well as the more heavily represented Puritan variety) in her father's study.

Moreover, he did not hold her back when her early scholarship resulted in a decision to leave Presbyterianism and join the Church of England, the communion that had ejected Annesley as a nonconformist years before. Reason, no less than conscience, was highly enough valued in the Annesley household that a young (twelve-year-old!) woman might be permitted

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 32 (reverse pagination).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 50, 24 (reverse pagination).

<sup>20</sup> Walmsley, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Defoe, quoted in Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: Rediscovering Women in History from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to the Present* (New York: Random, 1974), 14.

to follow where it led, even beyond the bounds of the family's dearly-held religious traditions.

Brought up in such an atmosphere, Susanna Wesley would make sure that her daughters, as well as her sons, were educated. So while Samuel, John, and Charles received their earliest instruction from her, she was the *sole* teacher of the seven Wesley girls. In the well-known letter to her son John on the subject of child-raising, she describes her pedagogical method and comments on one of her rules, "That no girl be taught to work till she can read very well":

This rule also is much to be observed; for the putting children to learn sewing before they can read perfectly, is the very reason, why so few women can read fit to be heard, and never to be well understood.<sup>22</sup>

As for the boys, though they went on to the best preparatory schools and to Oxford, they still regarded their mother as their theological mentor. The letters exchanged between Susanna and son John, for example, reveal his eagerness continually to seek out and attend to her wise counsel, even when it contradicted his own ideas.

The "Age of Reason" was obviously having its effects, limited enough at the time, in freeing women from some of the stereotypical roles reserved to them. In Susanna Wesley's case we may see one woman who was able to think for herself, and on that basis occasionally act in more independent ways than many of her contemporaries. Some of these same intellectual currents were also at work liberalizing accepted religious ideas, and even her devotional life was not immune from this rationalism. In fact, theology (practical rather than speculative) was her major intellectual preoccupation. It dominates the writing she has left: the treatises she wrote for the education of her teen-aged daughters and her letters as well as her devotional journal. We should not expect to find Deism or some other sort of full-blown theological rationalism there; her intellectual quest did not lead her that far from the solid Protestant orthodoxy of her upbringing. Note, however, that she did for a time as a young woman question some of Christianity's assumptions; and she might even have followed some of the age's more daring intellectuals into Unitarianism had it not been for the theological conversation of another lapsed, dissenting, but thoroughly orthodox Christian, that is, her soon-to-be husband, Samuel Wesley.<sup>23</sup>

If Susanna Annesley did not succumb to the "Socinian heresy," nor to the typical rationalist critique of Christ's resurrection and the gospel miracles, she did not remain entirely immune to the appeal of a reasoned faith as it was then being presented by theologians and philosophers. As the mature Susanna Wesley, she often employed the categories and assumptions of the age in her devotions. There they helped shape her piety and helped give her

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<sup>22</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: John Mason, 1829), vol. 1:393.

<sup>23</sup> Newton, 66, 156.

the independence of judgment that would ensure a cogent defense of her sometimes "irregular" activities. Reason would never supplant revelation in religious discourse, but as a gift of God it must be properly employed, not despised.

In a set of entries in May, 1711, we find her glorifying God for the gift of reason and even equating what it teaches with that revealed in scripture:

Glory be to Thee, O Lord, for thy infinite Wisdom in giving to Rational Free Agents a Law Suitable to their natures, and tending to their happiness! The whole Substance matter of the Law of Reason is briefly summed up in those two comprehensive Duties, the Love of God and the Love of Man, and upon these two hang all the Law and the Prophets.<sup>24</sup>

Then she applies the insight to her own situation, particularly to her call as educator of her children. She examines her need as teacher, to 'practice what she preaches,' especially to "take care of your Affections, that they may keep pace with and be agreeable to your convictions of the great truths of natural and Revealed Religion." Further reflection leads her to admit, however, that at the very core of her personality, at the center of what we might call her "identity," is this gift of reason: "Preserve the Dignity of your Nature," she concludes. "Reverence yourself and do nothing unworthy the Reason God has given you."<sup>25</sup>

In her devotional journal Susanna Wesley is not very careful in naming those thinkers with whom she is in dialogue during her periods of meditation. Nor would we expect her to be. At the same time, however, one does not need to read through very many pages to discover the identifiable intellectual influences. There are, for instance, references to the historian Maimbourg, the French philosophers Pascal and Malebranche, various Anglican theologians (William Beyeridge, Edward Stillingfleet, George Rust, George Bull), as well as to Plato, Aristotle and Seneca.<sup>26</sup> In some cases the references are fleeting, and quotation does not always mean approval. She frequently 'begs to differ.'<sup>27</sup>

Among these luminaries one star that shone brightly in the intellectual universe of the early eighteenth century is rather extensively represented, more so than one would expect in a devotional journal. G. R. Cragg describes that star, John Locke, as the one who fashioned "that picture of the mental world which became a commonplace in the eighteenth century."<sup>28</sup> It was his insistence upon, and explanation of, the role of reason that gave religious thought "the self-possessed assurance" which typified the eighteenth

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<sup>24</sup> Susanna Wesley, *Journal*, A, 68.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 68–69.

<sup>26</sup> Newton, 138.

<sup>27</sup> Other cryptic references remain to be identified, e.g., such abbreviations as Lord K., Dr. L. C., Lu.

<sup>28</sup> G. R. Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966), 114.

century.<sup>29</sup> Susanna Wesley never refers directly to his treatise, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, but that might easily describe the spirit of many of her meditations.

She did deal directly in her journal with the more general *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, a book which, as Frederick Dreyer has recently reminded us, exerted an immense influence on John Wesley.<sup>30</sup> At the beginning of one such discussion, she asks the practical question, "Of what use?" She is not only concerned to justify her reading of a rationalist, but also to indicate the role his approach might have for her devotional life. The short answer is that Locke's epistemology can be very helpful to the Christian.

So [she contends] if we know by what way we receive our Ideas, though it may not always be in our power to prevent their entrance, especially in the case of Simple Ideas, yet we may be able to observe and distinguish them, and apply them to their proper use.

More to the point,

. . . if any of these Ideas are sinful and we would prevent the mischief they would do, we must particularly guard those Senses of the Body by which they enter or Passions in the mind that they are wont to affect.<sup>31</sup>

Puritan conscience here has no problem harnessing even the latest rationalist philosophy.

In the wider theological arena, as well, Susanna Wesley could agree with the spirit and substance of Locke's empiricism. Following his lead, she finds it is unnecessary to base religion on "innate principles." There is no need to speculate as to whether the idea of God is inborn in the human soul, since "God hath given to the whole Humane Species Sense, Perception, and Reason. And the Being and Perfections of God are so clearly manifested in all the visible Creation that a small advertence will easily induce any Creature so qualified [*sic*] to believe there is a God."<sup>32</sup> In another entry she agrees with Locke's principle that divine revelation must not contradict reason: "There is nothing more true than that we ought to believe whatever truth God hath revealed upon his Authority, but then the truth of the Revelation must be proved either by Sense or reason, or both."<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, she was even more aware than Locke of the areas in which reason must yield to revelation if the truth is to be apprehended. "Submit your Reason," she says, after praising God for speculative insights she has made into the divine nature, "so far to your Faith as not to doubt or scruple those points of Faith which are

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 121. For additional useful background see Frederick Copleston's *A History of Philosophy: Volume 5, Modern Philosophy: The British Philosophers, Part I, Hobbes to Paley* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964).

<sup>30</sup> Frederick Dreyer, "Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley," *American Historical Review*, 88 (February, 1983): 12–30.

<sup>31</sup> Susanna Wesley, *Journal*, A, 67.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 (reverse pagination).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

mysterious to us through the weakness of our Understanding, and Adore the Mystery you cannot comprehend."<sup>34</sup>

Reason does not finally displace revelation for Susanna Wesley. But reasonableness, understanding, instruction, the importance of the rational mind—all the many components that made up “the Age of Reason”—were deeply engrained in her personality and conspicuous even in her private meditations. A recent study on the “Early Liberal Roots of Feminism” concludes that “Locke was a part of a shifting collective consciousness which made the sexual revolution a possibility,” anticipating some of the thoughts of John Stuart Mill and others a century later.<sup>35</sup> With Susanna Wesley's ministerial tendencies in mind, it is certainly intriguing to discover that Locke once praised and encouraged a woman preacher in her work.<sup>36</sup> The wide-ranging inclusion of intellectual concerns in her life and devotion argues that the mistress of the Epworth rectory received similar, if indirect, encouragement from Locke and from the other voices of reason then available to her.

### III

One of the defining tensions of the eighteenth-century religious scene—the seemingly contrary pull of reason and experience—is neatly illustrated in Susanna Wesley's spirituality. That she is consciously aware of the necessary balance can be seen from an epigrammatic entry in her journal:

Reason and Experience determine our persuasion—Experience without Reason may seem the Delusion of Fancy—Reason without Experience proves oftentime ineffectual, but when they meet together they give a man all the Satisfaction he can desire  
 . . . .<sup>37</sup>

What was a daughter of the Puritans (and of the Enlightenment) doing casting even a sidelong glance at religious experience? An appreciation of the religious affections is not, as it might first seem, out of step with the times. After all, Locke had more than a little to say about how our ideas come from experience and sensation, providing an epistemological basis for John Wesley's religion of the heart some years later.<sup>38</sup> And, Gordon Rupp's point is well taken: there developed a full-blown “devotion of rapture” among English Puritans, one “embedded in an often complex rationalism.”<sup>39</sup> Keith Thomas makes an additional link in his study of women in the radical Puritan sects. Whether or not women were (are?) more susceptible to religious en-

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 61; cf. Cragg, 123.

<sup>35</sup> Melissa Butler, “Early Liberal Roots of Feminism: John Locke and the Attack on Patriarchy,” *American Political Science Review* 72 (1978): 35–50, 149.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 150. Cf. Dr. Johnson's famous epigram (quoted in Butler), his response to a similar situation years later: “Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hindlegs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.”

<sup>37</sup> Susanna Wesley, *Journal*, B, 102.

<sup>38</sup> Dreyer, 29–30.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon Rupp, “A Devotion of Rapture in English Puritanism,” in *Reformation, Conformity and Dissent: Essays in honour of Geoffrey Nuttall*, ed. R. Knox (London: Epworth, 1977), 119.

thusiasm, they certainly took full advantage of its authority, participating in church government as well as prophesying and preaching. Any group which revered the Holy Spirit's unpredictable power, must necessarily (like the Quakers) allow that Spirit to speak through women. Concludes Thomas, "Under the outpourings of even its most extravagant female adherents we can, I think, detect, albeit in exaggerated form, the claims of women to be heard in their own right."<sup>40</sup>

Susanna Wesley, of course, grew up in the more conservative Presbyterian wing of Puritanism. But there were strong devotional resources available in that tradition (not least among them her father's friend Richard Baxter), as well as in the Anglicanism she joined as a young woman, resources that she obviously employed in her own contemplative life. If, as Rupp claims, "this religion of the heart seems to have disappeared [in the 1660s] like an underground stream to emerge in the Evangelical Revival," one of the more important subterranean currents may be discovered in Susanna Wesley's devotional journal.<sup>41</sup>

Some thirty years after leaving her father's nonconformity and nearly thirty years before the outbreak of revival led by her two famous sons, she filled that journal with examples of heart-felt religion. The *manner* of these entries gives them away as much as their matter. Interjections of "Glory!" often punctuate her meditations; exclamation points abound. "Glory be to Thee, O Lord" and "Amen, Lord Jesus!" are not unusual expressions of her thanks or praise.<sup>42</sup> Similar rhapsodies typify her considerations of the divine majesty:

You do not speak magnificently, nor worthily of him who is the high and Lofty One, that inhabits Eternity! . . . Holiness is his Essence. 'Tis the Eternal infinite Rectitude of his Nature! causing him to Act always suitably to the transcendent Excellence and Dignity of his own Perfections! . . . He is power! Wisdom! Justice! Goodness! Truth!<sup>43</sup>

Meditation on the atonement also obviously moves her to depths and heights of feeling: "The consideration of Christ Crucified, as it affords matter of the deepest, most piercing Grief, so likewise doth it give occasion for the most sublime, and perfect Joy, even to Exultation, and Ecstasy!"<sup>44</sup>

Reflection on particular blessings might excite a similar outpouring of emotion. For instance, a meditation on divine help in performing her various domestic duties, is bracketed by "Praise God, my Soul, and all that is with in me bless his Holy Name!" at the beginning and "Glory be to Thee, O Lord" at its close. Or again, a meditation on the Sabbath fires her deep sense of

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas, 48. Women also figure interestingly in Hillel Schwartz's excellent study *The French Prophets: The History of a Millenarian Group in Eighteenth-Century England* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: U California P, 1980).

<sup>41</sup> Rupp, 129.

<sup>42</sup> Susanna Wesley, Journal, A, 7, 55.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

gratitude:

Another Blessed Day! Lord, How could we support the Cares, and pains of Life were it not for the Refreshments of the dear and Holy Day! Glory be to thee, oh Eternal, ever Blessed Goodness, that has in this probationary State, afforded us such a vast invaluable Blessing as a Sabbath is!<sup>45</sup>

In like manner, the consideration of her own inadequacies in the face of God's greatness might also provoke the deeply felt sense of her status as creature: "Lord, I am Nothing! I have Nothing! I can do Nothing!"<sup>46</sup> The tone of her journal thus often affords the reader with an almost classic example of religious experience: her perception of, and response to, a *mysterium* that is both *tremendum* and *fascinans*.

If the style of many entries evidences religious enthusiasm, so, too, does the content indicate her commitment to experience as an important component of her devotional life. In discussing the ups and downs of her contemplation, she relates how pleasing it is when, after an interruption of some sort, she feels the Spirit leading her back. "But how much more delightful is it," she continues, "to find a constant sense of God upon your Soul." To reinforce this point she then draws on George Herbert, whose poetry is quite often quoted in the journal.

Not thankful when it pleaseth me  
As if thy Blessings had Spare Days,  
But such a heart whose Pulse may be  
Thy praise!<sup>47</sup>

This is the sort of steady religious temper she would aim for in her own life. Indeed, for all her reliance on Christian experience, she is aware of the potential harmful effects of too strenuous a period of meditation<sup>48</sup> and quotes Bishop Beveridge approvingly when he warns against those who are "unstable and Giddy in Religion itself."<sup>49</sup> Too much spiritual elation, she knew from experience as well as from Beveridge, might "degenerate into light and trivial mirth." Thus, "our sense of God's Goodness" is not quite right unless, in addition to delighting us, it also "unites the Soul more closely to him, . . . makes us more vigorous in his service, more serious in our Devotions . . ."<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, if "a man's temper be cold and heavy, it is fit that he should particularly apply himself to the exciting [of] devout affections" since "constancy and firmness of mind doth seldom effect any matter, when it wants life and passion to put it into motion."<sup>51</sup> She also recommends "a due sense of God upon the Heart" in more detached theological disquisitions.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 8 (reverse pagination).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 171

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., C, 120–121.

This, more than any right notions about God's existence and excellence, is the necessary constituent of true godliness. "We may call it," she writes,

an Experimental Knowledge whereby a man hath the Sense of Experience of those perfections upon his own heart, which he knows and believes to be in God, whereby his Thoughts and Conceptions are so strangely enlarged, that he seems to apprehend him that is altogether incomprehensible, so that he is no longer able to endure himself, but is forced to cry out with Job . . . "By reason of God's Highness I cannot endure."<sup>52</sup>

She is even willing to argue that this "experimental" (as opposed to "speculative") knowledge of God's perfections is available to all people (historians of religion take note), even though "wicked men" will not always consciously entertain such thoughts. "We all," she says, "experience the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness, &c. of God daily . . ." <sup>53</sup> The difference between the godly and the ungodly, therefore, does not consist in one's perception of God. A "due sense of God" involves also some sort of conversion, "the great work of regeneration . . . in the Soul," which leads to a restoration of the divine image, of righteousness, of holiness. Without denying the "vast dissimilitude" between creator and creature in this process, she nevertheless seems to be drawing on the great Platonic tradition of western mysticism.<sup>54</sup> "A Soul thus renewed and Sanctified" she writes,

. . . loves as God Loves, though not in the same measure, for indeed his Love has no measure (but it is immense and boundless as his Essence). Yet it loves for the same reason: it loves Good as Good, and, knowing that God is Supreme Absolute Goodness, it loves God above all created Good, and all other Good as it bears a resemblance and Relation to His Eternal Goodness, being, indeed, an Emanation from the Deity. It rejoiceth with a Joy unspeakable and full of Glory in the infinite perfection of His Essential Blessedness and Glory: and though it feels itself awed and sometimes almost overwhelmed with a sense of the perfect Rectitude and majesty of the Divine, yet 'tis exceedingly delighted with the Thoughts of God's being what he is!<sup>55</sup>

Sometimes, her experience of the divine is rather more explicit, giving her not only a sense of God's presence, but a particular direction for the resolution of an immediate problem. Wrestling on one occasion with "present distress" she is finally able to get some needed sleep. Then comes, as if in a dream, the words she needs to hear. "Towards morning," she writes, "several times suggested by God's good Spirit (I believe): 'Tis better to resign and leave the whole manage of all secular Affairs to God! and apply yourself vigorously in good earnest to the duties of Religion . . ." <sup>56</sup>

Whether a particular answer to prayer or a more general sense of the divine presence, Susanna Wesley's religious experience represents a (perhaps *the*) key feature of her spirituality. All the speculative knowledge one has

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, A, 125.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>54</sup> See Marlin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography*, trans. Norman Goldhawk (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:47–58, esp. 53n5; Newton, 137–138.

<sup>55</sup> Susanna Wesley, *Journal*, A, 128.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 (reverse pagination).

will be of no consequence

unless the Soul feel and acknowledge that she can find no repose, no peace, no Joy but in Loving and being beloved by [God], and does accordingly rest in him as the centre of her Being, the Fountain of her pleasures, the Origin of all Virtue and Goodness, her Light, her Life, her Strength, her All, everything she wants or wisheth in this World and forever, in a Word, her Lord, her God!

Addressing God, she concludes the meditation:

I do not despise or neglect the Light of Reason, not that Knowledge of you which by her conduct may be collected from this godly System of created Beings, but this Speculative Knowledge is not the Knowledge I want and wish for.<sup>57</sup>

Here is evidence of the most important component of Susanna Wesley's spirituality, *primus inter pares*. As central and as strong as her religious experience was, it can be seen as the necessary force which shaped her identity and motivated her behavior, reinforcing the related factors of conscience and reason. In her life, as in the lives of her Puritan foremothers and her female spiritual heirs in the Evangelical Revival, Monsignor Knox's observation seems to be vindicated: "the history of enthusiasm is largely a history of female emancipation."<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

In her anthology *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism, 1525–1675*, Joyce Irwin finds it helpful to distinguish between two main categories within the Free Church tradition: the Anabaptist with its tendency to rely fundamentally on the word of scripture; and the Spiritualist, which founded its authority on the present promptings of the Holy Spirit. By and large she sees the latter sub-tradition allowing the most flexibility for women to expand their influence and take on new, non-traditional roles. Not that the Spiritualists (representing such groups as the radical Puritans which Thomas discusses) denigrated the role of scripture; but wherever the Spirit or the Inner Light could be used as guide and interpreter, a new forward-looking hermeneutic could be employed, even in the face of the Bible's traditional patriarchal assumptions.<sup>59</sup>

Neither Susanna Wesley's religious background ("mainline" Dissent) nor the tradition she converted to and lived with in as an adult (Anglicanism) seem to exhibit such a Spirit. To the extent to which this is true (to the extent that the institution had succeeded in "routinizing charisma") we should not expect to find any great evidence of female emancipation in either one. But if, as our investigation into her devotional life has indicated, there are residual elements of such a spiritual approach, then Susanna Wesley can be set in this wider context.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, B, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Ronald A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion with Special Reference to the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Oxford UP, 1950), 20.

<sup>59</sup> Joyce L. Irwin, ed., *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism: 1525–1675* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellon, 1979), xvi, xxvii–xxx.

The three components of her spirituality that we have chosen to emphasize—conscience, reason, religious experience—can be regarded as three primary expressions of the same spiritualist approach, present even in a woman nurtured and living with in rather more conservative traditions in a less radical context. The Spirit, whose operation is closely connected with each of these factors, continues to do his/ her/its (!) work even in unreceptive times.<sup>60</sup>

It was Susanna Wesley's intense, yet well-structured devotional life that brought all these forces together and marshalled them in such a fashion that, although she has been venerated more as the "mother of Methodism," we correctly perceive her as a person in her own right, an eminent example of feminine spirituality, despite the many ways eighteenth-century religion and society had hemmed her in. Perhaps it is precisely the tension between her inner life and the societal possibilities of her times that most compellingly recommends her story to us. Here, revealed in her devotional journal, we discover a richly-textured spirituality which in fact *does* illustrate women's "struggle for selfaffirmation, self-definition and autonomous self-donation . . . intrinsically linked to . . . conversion and progress in holiness."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), 36-37, 47. The Puritan emphasis on the Holy Spirit, associated, if not identified, with conscience, reason, and religious experience, provided the authority by which women could claim fuller participation in the churches. To the extent that Susanna Wesley fell heir to these influences and developed them in her devotional life, she, too, could live in the world of male-dominated Christianity without being completely determined and dominated by it.

There is also the intriguing possibility that the Spirit speaks for women's liberation in a much wider context. See L. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), in which spirit possession cults are seen as often functioning to enhance the status of women in a male-dominated society with a correspondingly patriarchal official religion. Further attempt at anthropological explanation might follow the lead of Victor Turner. People on the fringes of society's structures (e.g., women in the modern West?) often embody the greatest potential for creating new examples of religious "communitas" by means of their "liminality" or their "marginality" *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

Her conversion to the Church of England and her dabbling in Locke's "reasonableness," did nothing to lessen the important influences of her Puritan childhood. Conforming to the state church was one way a Dissenter might disavow the perceived excesses of the Puritan era, might second the return of proper royal and episcopal authority. But Susanna Wesley's "return" to Anglicanism, whatever else it was, was a declaration of independence from parental authority. Further, as a woman of non-juror sympathies, there was plenty of scope for the exercise of her sometimes tender conscience. And as a Church woman there was freer access to the whole range of divinity and philosophy then "comprehended" by a latitudinarian Establishment. George Herbert and Bishop Beveridge can be brought in to support her devotional life or sharpen her thinking. Even Locke, and the rationalist tendency he represents, can reinforce the spiritual foundation of her strong, independent personality. Reason is obviously the primary virtue here, but conscience is shored up by the rationalists' concern with morality, and even religious experience (short of wild and fanatical enthusiasm) is seriously dealt with in discussions of sensation, intuition and experience in general. "The Latitudinarians," concludes Cragg, "grew up in an age in which an intense personal religion was prized and cultivated. They rejected its outward forms but retained something of its inward reality" (80).

<sup>61</sup> Conn, 302.